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RARE BOOK ROOMS IN LIBRARIES

WILLIAM WARNER BISHOP

FOR a quarter of a century and more it has been plain to thoughtful observers that one serious administrative consequence of the ever growing direct use of books by persons granted admission to the shelves has been the increasing necessity for providing protection to book rarities. As the librarian of Harvard University has pointed out in a recent article,¹ the increase in size of book collections and their use by large numbers of scholars have forced the development of treasure rooms or rare book rooms as they are more generally termed, at a very considerable annual cost to libraries. It might be added that American libraries have within the same period acquired very large and important collections of valuable books and manuscripts which necessarily demand adequate safeguards for their proper use.² To discuss in some detail the administrative and structural requirements of such special provision for rare and valuable books is the purpose of this contribution to the volume published in honor of my old friend, Dr. Louis Round Wilson.

There are now but few libraries for scholars which deliberately and definitely close their shelves to all but employees of the library itself. The administration of the comparatively small number which still follow the ancient and traditional method of requiring all library books used to be passed out on signed call slips over a desk is relatively simple compared with that of libraries which admit to their stacks some hundreds or even thousands of persons yearly. But even those libraries whose stacks are technically "closed" are generally classified on the so-called "relative" system, which requires constant shifting of books to make room for new accessions. The possibilities of damage to books in such shifting are well known.³ Even the most modern li-

¹ Keyes D. Metcalf, "Some trends in research libraries," in *William Warner Bishop: a tribute* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), pp. 145-66.

² See W. W. Bishop, "Some newer responsibilities of American librarians," *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen*, I (1933), 106-11.

³ The old-fashioned practice of fixed location, which bids fair to be revived with the growing necessity for storage of parts of a library's stock, will not serve to overcome

brary stacks generally admit so much dust—particularly in large cities—that systematic and regular cleaning of the books is required, with all the latent possibilities of damage when the work is done wholesale and by unskilled labor. Fragile, delicate, beautifully bound and illustrated books are not left on open shelves even in a “closed-access” library. In “open-access” libraries they get some sort of special treatment almost without exception. When those open-access libraries are the resort of scholars and likewise have extremely valuable materials in large numbers, there arises the problem which now confronts the directors of most university, and even the larger college, libraries.

It is perhaps worth while to note with some care the reasons why rare book rooms with all their added cost have been forced on American libraries. It is fair to say that the practice is a direct result of a change in the character of the basic collections of our libraries. It is also a result of the ever growing prices of rare books and of the consciousness of both the financial and the scholarly value of materials formerly largely left out of American libraries. The problem has always existed but on a comparatively small scale until rather recently. I recall that in the old Detroit Public Library which I haunted in my boyhood there was an exhibit case showing a manuscript or two, some specimens of early printing, and a few autographs. Probably there were also a certain number of books which were “reserved,” but they were not known to a high-school student. I recall that certain books were marked with an asterisk in the printed catalogs to signify that they circulated only by special permission of the librarian. But I cannot recall any special rare book collection. Nor do I remember anything of the sort in the University of Michigan library in my undergraduate days. It was the acquisition of special collections and of book rarities, partly by gift, more by purchase, which forced the addition of a series of rare book rooms to the stacks at Michigan. Inquiry leads me to believe that a similar process went on in many other university and even public libraries. When once rare books were acquired, common prudence demanded that they be given special treatment. Incidentally, it may be remarked that failure to give adequate protection and care to special collections has led a good many collectors to refuse to present their treasures to certain libraries. There are still some painful memories of this sort which we cannot ignore.

the problems caused by the ownership of rare books and prints. The necessity for special care in both housing and service exists even in those libraries employing this ancient device.

Until recently American libraries have not had to create special departments to care for medieval or oriental manuscripts. But they have had the custody of "papers" of great importance to American history and have generally given them adequate treatment. This article is not concerned with manuscripts, with maps, or with coins or medals, all of which frequently find their way into libraries and require special treatment by well-trained scholars. When such objects are found in but small amounts, they may be (and generally are) entrusted to the care of the library's official in charge of rare books. But in any quantity they require separate treatment. Cabinets of medals and coins, for example, are found in many European, but in few American, libraries. Such collections demand both physical equipment and training of their custodians quite different from those required by collections of rare and valuable books.

In earlier days such rare books as our libraries owned were usually kept in locked cases with glass doors in the office of the librarian. For many decades this was adequate treatment. But, of course, it would not suffice for large collections. When I became the superintendent of the reading-room in the Library of Congress in 1907, I found in my charge some thousands of books labeled "Office." They included a choice and extensive collection of erotica which had drifted into the library in many ways other than direct purchase of those particular titles. There were many very valuable Americana in the "Office" collection, housed, it may be remarked, in great part at a very considerable distance from the actual offices. These books were all locked behind glass doors and given out to readers only on permission of the officer in charge of the reading-room. Long before I left in 1915 it was seen that a very different type of organization with a special staff was required to handle rare books. I believe (but I do not know) that it was the John Boyd Thatcher collection of incunabula which finally forced the Librarian of Congress to take the long-contemplated step of setting up a separate rare book room. The magnificent quarters and the highly expert staff now given to the service of rare books at the Library of Congress are certainly a far cry from Dr. Spofford's day, when his office could contain the entire national collection of book rarities.

In some libraries the librarian's office used to contain a built-in safe or vault in which book rarities were housed. When small they did very well. But larger vaults or safes are liable to be damp and dark and are certainly not good storage places. One recalls the magnificent

vault given to the Cornell Library by Andrew Carnegie to guard the very valuable treasures of that library. On my last visit to Cornell the vault door stood wide open with a light steel grill across it, because otherwise there was not sufficient ventilation and books mildewed. Most librarians now use their safes for storing books under negotiation and not yet added to the library. Even when used for this purpose, they require artificial changing of the air by exhaust fans. Safes are no answer to the problem of the care of rare books.

Present practice goes much further than was dreamed of in the older days. The great treasure rooms in the Stirling Library at Yale, the rare book rooms in the Library of Congress, the special quarters for recently acquired treasures at the New York Public Library, and similar provision in most of the newer university libraries (witness Virginia and Texas) are typical of the modern attitude toward rare books. But we cannot yet be said to have reached any agreement on building practices. This is in part owing to the fact that many such "treasure rooms" have been built to house special collections as units. The Michigan rooms are portions of the stacks set aside for rare books and suitably guarded against intrusion. This is a quite common practice.

We may set down some requirements which are common to all of them whatever their particular purpose or design. (1) They must be safe from theft or careless entrance. This requires special architectural planning. At the Clements Library at Michigan, for example, the treasure room has reinforced concrete walls, ceiling, and floor; steel shutters at the windows, whose glass is wired against either fire or theft; and hardened steel plates concealed in the wood of the two doors. Even the chimney is guarded by a grill. No thief imitating the traditional Santa Claus is going to get down that chimney at night. Similar, if not such elaborate, precautions are in vogue in the newer university library buildings. (2) Rare book rooms must be well ventilated. In damp climates they must have protection against mildew, a precaution also needful when one or more sides or the floor rests against clay or rock. Ventilation also implies temperature and moisture control. The actual chambers housing these books should never get above 70° in winter and should not be allowed to drop below 50° relative humidity. These ends are very hard to attain in old buildings, particularly when offices and reading-rooms are in the same building units as the bookrooms. Incidentally, precautions against flooding by the bursting of "risers" carrying water or steam are advisable. In one

library known to me the architect actually proposed to run a high-pressure water pipe through the rare book rooms. Of course, that was all right—as long as nothing happened. (3) Lighting is a simple matter save for certain special uses of ultra-violet lamps, etc. Outlets for such lamps can be provided easily, whether they are installed or not. Also there should be provision for cables carrying a heavier amperage than that used for ordinary electric light in view of possible electric machines for various purposes. These should run into the small work-rooms which should be a part of any newly planned rare book installation. (4) Shelving should be ample, and provision should be made for a certain number of deep cases for extra-large books, including atlases. Steel shelving is probably the best for use, although wooden shelves are perfectly sound practice. The amount of dust in the atmosphere, even when the air is supposedly washed and filtered, should govern the question of providing glass doors to the cases. In a smoky city it is impossible to have too many precautions against the intrusion of air-borne soot, which is so destructive to paper. (5) Rooms directly adjacent to the storage quarters must be provided both for curators' offices and for the consultation under supervision of book rarities. These should, of course, have good natural and artificial lighting and proper ventilation and should include at least one or more small soundproof rooms for typing.

All these requirements need not prove very costly—save in cubic space—in a new building. They are much more difficult to reach in an older structure which must be adapted to these newer uses. They represent the minimum in protection and provision for consultation. Without proper facilities for use, no amount of provision for safe storage will prove satisfactory.

It will be gathered from what has gone before that it is taken for granted that an adequate force of curators will be provided for rare book rooms. They are a necessity. Without them, "dead" storage alone is given to book treasures. They are a prime requisite to any satisfactory system of rare book use and are just as necessary as proper curators in a modern museum. No one would dream of organizing a museum without specialists in charge of its several departments. By the same token curators of special competence are needed for rare and valuable books and papers.

Granted the provision of competent curators, there remains the very practical question of what books should go into rare book rooms. Such books are, it must be remembered, reserved from direct and easy

access in book stacks. They will still be accessible, but with certain restrictions and precautions in use. It is not fair to the persons using the library to place books in treasure rooms without definite and clear reasons. And it is probably worth while to insist in any open-access library that wooden "dummies" be placed in the shelves for every book transferred or purchased for the rare book room. Particularly in university libraries, where professors and others use the books on the shelves constantly in their work, this precaution is needful.

Of course, cost and current prices—by no means always the same thing—are determining factors. Books which have long been owned by a library frequently attain a sudden financial value all unsuspected by the librarians unless they watch with minute care the antiquarian book markets. It goes without saying that very costly books should go into rare book rooms. But what is a proper lower limit of cost? It is plain that this is a matter to be determined by each library for itself. I recall an amusing three-cornered discussion of this topic between three division chiefs of the Library of Congress, the late H. H. B. Meyer, then chief of the Order Division, J. C. M. Hanson, the chief cataloger, and myself. Meyer was determined to arrive at a price. Hanson showed him that many a book which was bought or even offered at a low price or had been received as a gift should go into the "Office" and that (conversely) many a costly volume was so much in demand that it must be where it could be used without formality. I pointed out the physical limitations of reserved space even in that day when the building was fairly new. Meyer kept raising his limit; should it be books costing more than fifty dollars, than seventy-five dollars, than one hundred dollars? As I recall it, the upshot of the whole matter was that critical judgment with strict regard to the limits of space would have to be exercised in each instance. Not a very satisfactory conclusion, but I see no better basis thirty years later.

To my mind a far better basis for segregation is the probable difficulty of replacement of any given book. First editions of older and of modern authors are generally held in rare book rooms, but friction arises because in many cases there has been but one edition and no collected works have been published. Take a typical case—the poems and plays of John Davidson, a nineteenth-century minor author. Of most of them but one edition was ever printed. Now certain classes in English at Michigan are required to read these. Their price is fortunately not prohibitive, but it took us years to obtain second and third copies of certain titles for use by classes, in order to enable us,

without undue friction, to keep copies in the rare book room. This case could be multiplied many, many times. As is usual in libraries, one is forced to a series of compromises between the desirable and the possible. As a principle, the library should buy later editions if it puts first editions in rare book rooms, and, failing later editions, an effort should be made to secure other copies of the first edition when these are not excessively costly.

But first editions by no means exhaust the supply of books hard to replace. Limited editions are very prevalent, some of an extremely small number of copies, twenty or twenty-five, and others running to one hundred or even three hundred copies. It is very hard to say whether these can be replaced if worn out or lost. Books tend to gravitate to libraries rather than to remain on the market. There are about three hundred major libraries in the world today, and sooner or later they will absorb the supply of books of value published in limited editions. There is, of course, no point in worrying about limited editions of books otherwise published. Because someone prints privately twenty-five copies of *Venus and Adonis*, the book does not necessarily justify search and purchase, unless the private press achieves distinction of itself because of the beauty of its product. Then it may properly be a rare book room item, not for its contents but for its form and the reputation of the man who printed it. There are, however, currently issued a great many books of high value for their contents, which are printed in small numbers and which are not otherwise available. Take Hunter Miller's *Diary of the Peace Conference*, issued in twenty-one volumes in but forty copies. That is a fundamental document. A librarian who would place it on open shelves is surely guilty of gross negligence. So, after a good many years of experience, I have hit on three hundred copies as a limit. Books printed in three hundred copies or less go in the rare book room as a matter of routine. Once in a while there is an exception—but it must be justified. The difficulty of replacement will also operate to place in rare book rooms many a book from unusual sources or privately issued. I recall the wrath of the late Professor Channing of Harvard directed at librarians generally because they didn't buy for their libraries privately printed books. No explanations satisfied him. He wanted the books, and American professors want what they want when they want it. If we get them, most private imprints belong in treasure rooms.

Of course beautiful bindings—or bindings typical of certain styles or eras or binders—belong in such rooms. So do books with fine illus-

trations or beautifully printed, though not all Bruce Rogers books, for example, can be reserved without disastrous conflicts with users, unless in second copies. Famous editions also, and so on, and so on. The age of books will also govern to some extent their segregation in rare book rooms; incunabula, of course, and in most libraries books before 1550. The age limit will vary with the western expansion of printing in the Americas. British books before 1645 were not necessarily rare or valuable, but those few products of the Massachusetts Press which were printed by that time belong in any library in its collection of treasures. As printing spread in America the dates change. Michigan books before 1850 are rare. Illinois books printed before the Chicago Fire of 1871 are in a class by themselves. And so on across the continent.

One of the exciting jobs of a curator of rare books is the search of an old library's shelves for volumes to go into his charge. I recall with unfeigned pleasure some discoveries of my own in the Library of Congress and at the University of Michigan. For example, I found an English Bible of 1535 (lacking the Old Testament title-page) among a nondescript lot of supposedly defective books at the Washington library and eleven incunabula on the ordinary shelves in my first month at Michigan. To offset such delights, however, I have had many a reader bring in to me a very rare or costly volume which he had discovered on our shelves, frequently much battered by hard usage and certainly deserving a place in the rare book room.

This is perhaps the place for a word or two on one of the most difficult problems confronting a university librarian—the proper handling of erotica. Ever since books began to be printed, there have appeared at intervals volumes issued with the purpose of capitalizing one of man's fundamental instincts for the financial benefit of authors and publishers. Of course, standards and tastes change. No one need be greatly bothered by the frankness of an earlier and lusty age. Even the Bible contains frank passages which are usually glossed over. There are classics in many languages which we not only tolerate but read with appreciation for their great qualities, undeterred by certain passages which we should hardly expect today. And it is a notorious fact that much modern literature is characterized by a frankness and even a salaciousness which more conservative times would have found wholly offensive. It is not this type of book which makes much trouble for administrators of libraries. Rather it is the definitely pornographic works which are clandestinely printed in numbers today

(as always) and that type of borderline book about which one always has doubts. There have been also published a good many books with illustrations which more than border on the indecent—a few of them by artists of great power and distinction. Also there are a large number of books of a scientific or pseudoscientific cast which deal with sexual relations and their aberrations. Some of all these classes of books get into libraries, generally when whole collections are acquired either by gift or by purchase, very few by direct purchase. What to do with them? If left on open shelves, they rather quickly disappear or are mutilated by the theft of illustrations. If given full cataloging under subjects they will be constantly demanded, no matter where they are located. They are a difficult problem, which is not lessened by the fact that any medical or even psychological collection must have many works which are not suited for general circulation, especially in libraries frequented by numbers of adolescents. In short, one has to deal with books which represent on their bad side and for many readers distinctly diseased conditions of mind and at their best are fit matter for study only by psychiatrists.

If there is a medical school in the university, the problem is much simplified for the librarian. Such books belong to the psychiatrist and to their allied groups, and their use and storage are easily controlled in a medical library. But, lacking this easy disposition, there remains for the librarian of a general library very little choice. He must either refuse utterly to keep books of an erotic nature or, because of the administrative difficulties involved, must segregate them under strict regulations as to their location and use. If cataloged in a general library, such books should have author cards, but even these will prove a constant source of annoyance. Of course, in any library, university or public, there will be complaints from persons who suspect the librarian of censorship and express a bitter resentment at it, which they perhaps genuinely feel. There will be equally bitter and generally more serious complaints from folk who are aggrieved at finding on the shelves what they regard as dreadful and pernicious books. The custodians of rare and valuable books do not welcome the charge of erotic books. But, as libraries are now organized, they probably will have to accept this as one of the burdens of their calling.

There are at least two other problems connected with treasure rooms or rare book rooms. The first of these is the special collection, generally gathered by an expert collector, which contains some rare and highly valuable works but also many hundreds of lesser books,

needful for covering the subject of the collection and valuable in the extreme when taken together, but not of themselves either costly or very rare. A good example is the Hubbard Collection of Imaginary Voyages in the University of Michigan library. This collection contains the first editions of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's travels*. These are among the very costly specimens of English literature. The collection likewise contains some hundreds of translations, editions, imitations, etc., of these two works which are not at all costly and which by themselves have little significance. Yet the whole collection is most unusual and very valuable both to scholars and to collectors. It takes a great deal of shelf space. But it belongs, without question, in a rare book room and deserves special care and protection, as well as constant additions. Every university library is sure to receive sooner or later similar collections. Their housing under rare book room conditions is a real problem. But their significance demands that libraries cheerfully pay the price in space and care.

There are likewise certain extremely important but very bulky sets, chiefly in the field of scientific exploring expeditions, which have reached very high prices in our day. The Wilkes Exploring Expedition is an example. Another is the great work of Humboldt and Bonpland on South and Central America. There is no need to call the roll of titles of great significance. The cost of these works alone would secure them special care. But their value as original records of natural science makes them far more important than their cost alone. There is a large group of less well-known but equally valuable scientific books which deserve that special care and treatment they will receive only under rare book room supervision. It is easy to see that here again the criterion is the difficulty of replacement. One can hardly imagine now a set of Audubon's *Birds* on open shelves, but I remember very well when the Michigan set was exposed to inspection and handling by every visitor to the art gallery in the library. When I became librarian, it had been placed in the recently established rare book room. But two plates had been stolen from the set, which, by the way, was bought from Audubon himself. By great good fortune some fifteen years later we were able to buy copies of these two plates and thus to bind up the volumes in complete condition.

The work of the curators of rare books is likely to be extremely varied and likewise extremely exacting. Of course, they deal with bibliographical problems all the time, becoming expert in the use of catalogs and indexes and competent to note minute variations from de-

scribed texts. They are likely to find their time almost wholly taken by the daily service of resident expert scholars who require particular editions and by visitors who come for the express purpose of consulting the library's treasures. They must supervise use, keeping a wary eye—not on strangers only, it may be remarked. They have to be conversant with the book arts, with subject bibliographies, with the history of various sciences, and with the books intrusted to their care. As a rule, the successful curator has but little time for preparing studies for publication—more's the pity—and university librarians find as a rule that it is better not to require them to do much cataloging, not because of lack of competence but from lack of time. There should certainly be several persons on the rare book room staff, especially in the larger libraries, both by reason of the exacting nature of the work itself and in order that each may develop special knowledge of certain fields.

The training of rare book room curators, therefore, becomes of great importance. It is probably not possible in library schools as now organized to do much more than to give certain fundamental courses and some samples of the work which may later fall to these curators. The complete bibliographical description of books of various ages and countries is fundamental and can be learned in any advanced course in cataloging. The making of books from early dates to the present and their binding and preservation can also be covered in library school courses. Beyond that it is experience which is the great teacher. Broad acquaintance with the history of learning is invaluable but is generally gained by reading and study rather than by formal instruction. Library school students who show an interest in rare and valuable books should be encouraged to develop that interest by study and observation and may well be placed in subordinate rare book room posts for training. But the true curator is probably born rather than made. We are fortunate in having developed a few in this country. And we have need for many more to succeed to the work which has been so well begun. For, depend upon it, the growth of general and university libraries is bound to produce more and more keepers of rare books.